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SUBJECT: SAAKASHVILI'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS: HITTING THE
RIGHT NOTES

11. (SBU) Summary: On January 20, President Saakashvili was sworn into his second term as President. After a close presidential election, Saakashvili's inaugural speech was infused with the theme of reconciliation -- with the opposition, among the various ethnic groups in Georgia, and with Russia. He made eliminating poverty the focus of his second term and pledged that the Government would work non-stop over the next 50 days to put in place a set of proposals which would guide this term. Although his inauguration was relatively lightly attended, internationals and Georgians we spoke to thought the speech hit the perfect pitch. The theme that resounded most among Georgians was the call on Georgians, despite their political views, religious faiths, or places of residence to unite and work together to build-up Georgia for future generations. End summary.

12. (SBU) On January 20, President Saakashvili gave his second inaugural address in front of the Parliament in downtown Tbilisi. Reflecting Saakashvili's current unpopularity in the capital as well as the freezing cold temperatures, his inauguration was relatively lightly attended. The opposition held a protest rally at the same time in another part of town. Still, internationals and Georgians we spoke to thought the speech hit the perfect pitch. The themes he stressed included:

-- Reaching out to the opposition: Saakashvili thanked the candidates who took part in the election and reached out to its leaders and its supporters, stressing that Georgia needs unity. He said that both the ruling party and the opposition have the same goal -- an united and strong Georgia -- and thanked the opposition for bringing the competition of differing ideas. He pledged to take steps to ensure more participation of the opposition in state institutions. "We do not have Georgians to lose, regardless of their political views."

-- Assessing how far Georgia has come to date: Saakashvili noted that the chief achievement in his first term was the creation of a truly modern Georgian state out of the "chaos, hopelessness, and corruption" that had existed previously. He pointed to the painful reforms, including opening society, curbing corruption, fighting crime, improving electricity, attracting investment, creating jobs, but acknowledged there continues to be a long way to go before all Georgians benefit from these sweeping reforms.

-- Setting new goals: Saakashvili made eliminating poverty the focus of his second term to ensure that democracy and freedom prevail in the long run. He set out as a goal ensuring that the positive effects of our reforms would be felt in all villages in Georgia. He proposed a number of immediate steps including: making cheap credit available,

improving the social safety net, and improving villages through the provision of gas, roads, credits, doctors, and schools.

-- Laying out a timetable: Saakashvili pledged results in 50 business days, after which time he would report on progress to the country. He promised by the end of that 50 days to make cheap credit to be a reality, to unveil a plan to gradually raise pensions to 100 USD, and to have a functioning national commission on poverty eradication -- in which he expressed hope to see opposition representation. He emphasized the importance of this work and his expectation that every staff member would work every single day to achieve this goal.

-- Reaching out to Russia: Saakashvili acknowledged the Georgian people's Euro-Atlantic orientation but emphasized that this is not targeted at any of Georgia's neighbors. He emphasized the importance of borders serving as bridges and explicitly extended a hand of partnership to "our northern neighbor," noting that "we should be friends, we should be closer and we should stand together." (Note: Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, who headed the Russian delegation to the inauguration, was seated in a prominent position immediately behind Saakashvili. End note.)

-- Resolving the conflicts: Saakashvili pledged to "work day and night so that I leave a united and whole Georgia to the next president, with a peaceful Abkhazia and South Ossetia." He promised to work to allow the hundreds of thousands who had fled the conflict zones - as well as their children - to return to those areas so that they may regain their past and live their future in "dignity and peace." He stressed that this goal is not to be done by one individual, or even one party, or even one government.

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13. (SBU) Comment: Saakashvili's speech hit just the right notes to capture the mood of a divided country. His focus on being more inclusive and doing more to eliminate poverty are two factors which hurt him in the election. Most Georgians want better relations with Russia, making this theme a popular one as well. His message on the separatist zones will have had strong appeal with the Georgian people but not perhaps with the Abkhaz or Ossetes, who believe that their concerns and interests are not factored into Georgian policy to "re-take" the separatist zones. This is the one oratorical area where Saakashvili perhaps could take a page out of his approach to Russia and offer a hand of friendship to start building some confidence between two sides that have radically disparate views of their futures. End comment.

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